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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students' understanding of culturally-loaded words (those that are similar in primary meaning but different in connotation between the two languages) approximates that of native speakers of English, and how much English proficiency level may account for the extent of this approximation. Subjects were 125 intermediate- and advanced-level EFL students at a Chinese university and 61 native English-speaking students from an American university. The groups were asked to rate the appropriateness of six culturally-loaded words and four culturally-neutral words in sentences that provided adequate contextual information. Analysis of responses indicates that there is some limited but inadequate EFL approximation of understanding of the culturally-loaded words, and that even advanced EFL students' comprehension of most of the words differs significantly from that of native speakers. Results suggest that EFL educators and researchers should pay more attention to this type of vocabulary, and that vocabulary should be taught in adequate and appropriate social and cultural context. Contains 23 references. (Author/MSE)

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Abstract

Acquisition of Culturally-Loaded Words in EFL

Although vocabulary learning has begun to gain due attention in L2 acquisition research, studies have been scarce on L2 acquisition of culturally-loaded words--those that are similar in primary meaning but different in connotation between L1 and L2. This study attempts to determine empirically whether or not EFL students' understanding of culturally-loaded words approximates that of native speakers of English, and how much English proficiency level may account for the extent of this approximation. The study involved 125 EFL students (all English majors with 64 being intermediate level and 61 advanced-level students) from a university in China and 61 native-speaker students from an American university. The three groups were asked to rate the appropriateness of six culturally-loaded words and four culturally-neutral words in sentences that provided adequate contextual information. Statistical analysis of the three groups' ratings indicates that there is some limited but inadequate EFL approximation towards the target model in the understanding of culturally-loaded words and that even advanced EFL students' understanding of most of the words differs significantly from that of the native speakers. The findings suggest that EFL/ESL educators and researchers should pay more attention to this special type of vocabulary and that vocabulary should be taught in adequate and appropriate social and cultural context.

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**Acquisition of Culturally-Loaded Words in EFL**

Vocabulary learning has begun to gain due attention in recent second language acquisition research. In addition to some journal articles (Ellis, 1995; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Ooi and Kim-Seoh, 1996; Read, 1993), several books have appeared on the subject in recent years (Carter and McCarthy, 1988; Coady and Huckin, 1997; Hatch and Brown, 1995; Lewis, 1993; Nation, 1990). Yet Ellis' (1985: 5) decade-old comment about the inadequacy of research on vocabulary acquisition still seems relevant:

> Second language acquisition refers to all the aspects of language that the language learner needs to master. However, the focus has been how L2 learners acquire grammatical systems, such as negative or interrogatives, or grammatical morphemes such as the plural "s" or the definitive and the indefinitive articles. Research has tended to ignore other levels about the acquisition of lexis.

So far while research on the acquisition of lexis has increased substantially on certain levels and issues such as vocabulary learning strategies and contexts, it has overlooked some other areas of concern. Acquisition of culturally-loaded words, for example, is one such neglected area.

Culturally loaded words refer to those lexical items which "are similar in primary meaning [in both L1 and L2] but different in connotation" (Lado, 1972: 286). These words should not, however, be confused with another group of difficult L2 words--those whose core meanings are also shared by their L1 counterparts but whose semantic grids differ. An example of the latter group is the verb "open." There is no difference between Chinese and English in the core meaning of the word: "to move (something) from a closed position to an open position," but the word is gridded much more broadly in Chinese than in English, for in Chinese, one may open

not only doors or boxes but also lights or radios, but in English, one has to "turn on," not "open," lights or radios. Like words that differ in semantic grids, culturally-loaded L2 words contain the same core meanings as their L1 counterparts. Yet unlike semantic-grid-different words, culturally-loaded words may or may not share the L1 semantic grids, and, most important of all, they differ from the L1 words in their connotational meanings. One example of a culturally-loaded word is the adjective "fat." The word denotes "fleshy" in both English and Spanish, but it connotes entirely different meanings. While the word is pejorative in American English suggesting being overweight and unhealthy, in Spanish, as Lado (1972: 286) illustrates with his personal experience, it is often complimentary signifying good health. The word "pub" serves as another example. Although "pub" refers to the same kind of facility in both Arabic and English, it means, in Britain, nothing more than a place where people drink and socialize, but it suggests in the Muslim Arabic world "a place where people sin against God and morality" (Laufer, 1990: 582). For ESL/EFL students to miss the cultural connotations of these words could easily cause serious problems in their communication with native speakers. Asian students seem particularly likely to face such problems because of the sharp cultural differences between the English speaking countries and the Asian societies and because of the impact of the differences on lexical meanings.

A Chinese student of one of the authors was once a guest at an American family's home in the U.S. Before coming to America, the student had studied and taught English in China for twelve years. One day, the hostess, who was over sixty, was decorating the house for Christmas. She was stepping on a ladder hanging lights. The student wanted to help and said, "You are old. Let me do it." The hostess became livid and responded angrily, "You think I'm old?" The student was shocked and very upset by the response, for she did not know that the word "old"

which was neutral and positive in Chinese was very negative in English. So understanding a word's cultural connotations is a very important, though difficult, part of vocabulary knowledge, a part of what Read (1993) calls "depth" of vocabulary knowledge. More attention, according to Read (1993: 357), should be paid in L2 vocabulary learning and assessment to students' depth of knowledge (how well they know particular words) since traditionally educators have focused mostly on learners' breadth of knowledge (how many words the students know).

Although Lado (1972) pointed out long ago the difficulty culturally-loaded words would often pose to L2 learners, there has been little research on the issue. Carter and McCarthy (1988), Lewis (1993), and Nation (1990), for example, did not touch on the question in their books. Nor did any of the 14 articles in Coady and Huckin's (1997) recent comprehensive volume on L2 vocabulary acquisition research. Hatch and Brown (1995) and Laufer (1990) only briefly discussed the issue. Furthermore, most of those who did address the question based their discussion on intuition or anecdotes. Intuition, as studies (Brouwer, Gerritsen, and DeHaan, 1979; Pica, 1983; Wolfson, 1989) have shown, is unreliable and often inaccurate. There has been little empirical research directly on L2 students' learning and understanding of culturally-loaded words, for, although Ijaz (1986) and Strick (1980) examined how, among other things, L1 cultural knowledge may impact on L2 vocabulary understanding, their empirical studies were not on culturally-loaded words. Qi (1992) was the only one who, according to our research, examined the issue directly. Yet his research, which found significant differences between ESL speakers' and native English speakers' understanding of the connotation of culturally-loaded words, was a very small case study involving a total of only four subjects.

All this has led to the present study which aims to determine empirically on a larger scale

1) whether EFL students' understanding of selected culturally-loaded words approximates that of native speakers of English, as does their understanding of other words (Zhang, 1995), and 2) to what extent EFL proficiency accounts for such approximation.

## Method

### Subjects

The study included, as a control group, 61 native-speaker American students in a university in Oklahoma, and 125 Mandarin-speaking college students who majored in English at a university in Nanchang, PRC. Of the 125 Chinese students, 64 were freshmen and sophomores, and 61 were juniors and seniors. The 64 freshmen and sophomores were classified as intermediate level English learners based on the fact they all had studied English for six years in secondary school before they came to college, and they all had scored high enough on the English Test of the very competitive National College Entrance Examinations to enter the college and major in English. The 61 juniors and the seniors were grouped as advanced learners of English because they had undertaken at least two years of intensive English study at the college level. Like most other college students in China, these students were studying under the four-year system rather than the U.S. credit hour system. In such a year-based system, English majors who enter in the same year will take the same classes throughout the four years of college and have to pass the courses and exams and demonstrate the required English proficiency in order to be promoted to the next year/grade. Additionally, in the Chinese system, college students take at least seventy percent of the courses in their major field, which means the juniors and the seniors in question had spent most of their school time studying English in the two or three years before participating in the study.

Low-level Chinese learners of English were not included in the study because 1) low-level EFL learners' vocabulary is very limited, and they may not know some of the words in the study; 2) vocabulary learning, as recent research (Nation, 1990, Schmitt and Schmitt, 1995; Schmitt, 1996) indicates, is incremental and involves various aspects of word knowledge. So even if the low-level students "know" all the words, their knowledge is conceivably limited to the core meanings, the type of vocabulary knowledge learners usually acquire first in their process of learning a new word. Because of their limited vocabulary knowledge, low-level students are very likely to randomly guess the appropriateness of the words, thus confounding the results of the study.

**Instruments**

Ten vocabulary items were selected, and a sentence was generated for each item to form a survey test (Appendix 1). The sentences were written in such a way that the words were fully contextualized, and the clarity of the sentences was checked and confirmed by 23 educated native English speakers who were either graduate students or faculty members at the university in Oklahoma mentioned earlier. Based on the authors' knowledge and observations about Chinese and English usage (both authors were fluent and well educated in Chinese and English), six of the words were considered inappropriate in English but appropriate in Chinese in the way they were used. These six words included "fat," "old," "waste," "propaganda," "laborer," and "politics." "Fat" and "old" traditionally contain a positive connotation for Chinese speakers. In Chinese, putting on weight has usually been considered a good thing to be complimented on. The word "old" in Chinese, unlike in English where it generally has only negative connotations, can be both positive and negative. When used before pejorative nouns like "jiaohuo" or "dongxi"

(both derogatory words referring to a person), "old" suggests "senile" as in English, but when used to modify neutral nouns like "cadres," "workers," or "teachers," it implies "experienced," "wise," and "respectable." So one frequently hears the phrases "old cadres" and "old workers" as expressions of respect. Both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, when they were alive, were often reverently referred to as "ta lao renjia [literally, he old person]." It is a great honor to be addressed by one's last name plus "lao," i.e. "X Old." One has to have held extremely high positions or to have achieved extraordinary scholarly accomplishments to be called "X lao."

"Waste" in Chinese often has the same negative connotations as in English, but in the context of the sample sentence, the word does not convey the usual pejorative meaning. It is common and appropriate in Chinese for one to say to the host upon leaving after an appointment, "I'm sorry to have wasted so much of your time," especially if the latter is a superior or has rendered some help to the former. The intention is to show the humility of the speaker and to show respect to the host. Such intention, as Wu and Stephens (1991) documented, is, however, often lost with English speakers who, upon hearing the remark, would feel that the visitor did not appreciate the time and the work he/she had just accomplished.

"Propaganda," "laborers," and "politics" all have rather positive connotations in Chinese for ideological or political reasons. China has a department of propaganda at almost every level of its government. "Laborer," as Xu (1987) points out, is a lofty term in socialist ideology, and it does not possess the meaning of "an unskilled working man" (p. 70). Similarly, "politics" is something of great honor and importance. The government officials are always calling upon the Chinese people to attach great importance to "politics" and to treat politics as the first priority in their work and life.

The other four words included in the test ("visit," "instruction," "ugly," and "stupid")

were chosen as control items to avoid having the items strictly inappropriate in English and entirely appropriate in Chinese. "Visit" and "instruction" are culturally-neutral words, (i.e. they do not seem to have any pejorative connotations in either language). "Ugly" and "stupid," on the other hand, are derogatory in both languages. They are thus cultural-connotation-similar words.

The subjects were asked to rate the appropriateness of these words in the sentence using a 1 to 5 scale where 1 meant the word was appropriate, and the rater would use it in the sentence; 2 meant the word was somewhat appropriate, and the rater probably would use it; 3 meant the rater was not sure; 4 meant the word was somewhat inappropriate, and the rater probably would not use it; 5 meant the word was inappropriate, and the rater would not use it.

**Procedures**

**Pilot Study: Verification of the Items' Cultural Connotations**

In order to ascertain the accuracy of the above intuitive understanding of the cultural meanings of these words, the survey questions were first given as a type of pilot study to 20 native speakers of American English who were students at the university in Oklahoma, and a Chinese version (Appendix 2) was administered to 20 Chinese students studying at the same institution. It is important to point out that in the actual study, the EFL students in China were given the English version, not the Chinese version of the survey test.

**Statistical Analysis of the Pilot Study**

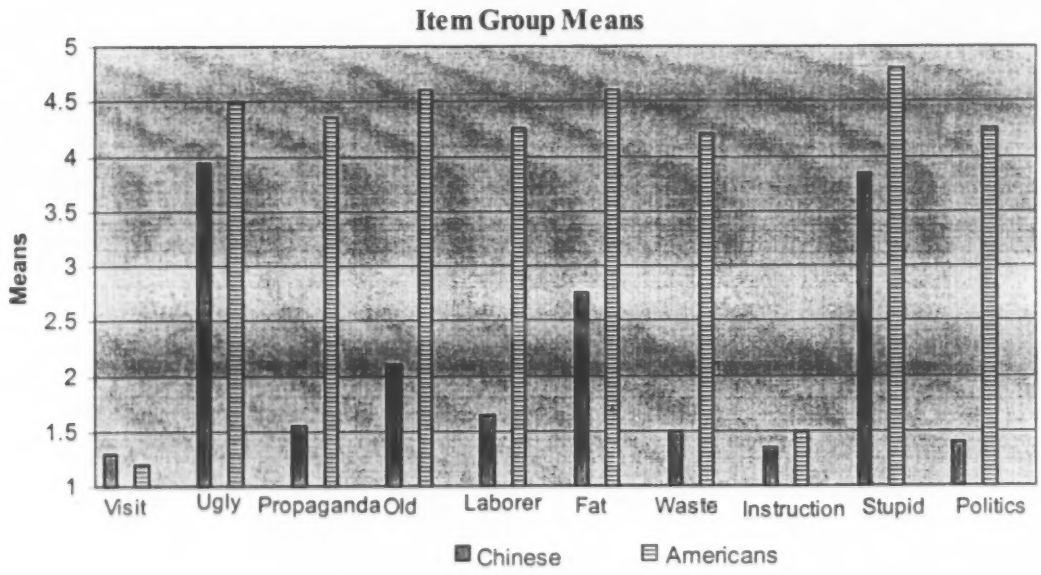
The results of the pilot study were analyzed using A *t*-test to determine whether there were significant differences between the two groups' ratings on each of the ten items. The results (see Table 1 and Figure 1 on Page 8) supported our intuitive understanding of all the items

## Table 1

**Means, Standard Deviations, and *t* Values of Comparison between the Chinese and the Americans' Ratings**

| | Chinese (N = 20) | | Americans (N = 20) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Item* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *t* | *p* |
| Visit | 1.30 | 0.47 | 1.20 | 0.41 | 0.72 | NS |
| Ugly | 3.95 | 0.95 | 4.50 | 0.69 | 2.10 | 0.04 |
| Propaganda | 1.55 | 0.89 | 4.35 | 0.81 | 10.41 | 0.0001 |
| Old | 2.10 | 0.97 | 4.60 | 0.60 | 9.83 | 0.0001 |
| Laborer | 1.65 | 0.75 | 4.25 | 0.81 | 10.28 | 0.0001 |
| Fat | 2.75 | 1.29 | 4.60 | 0.68 | 5.66 | 0.0001 |
| Waste | 1.50 | 0.61 | 4.20 | 1.00 | 10.28 | 0.0001 |
| Instruction | 1.35 | 0.59 | 1.50 | 0.76 | 0.69 | NS |
| Stupid | 3.85 | 0.99 | 4.80 | 0.41 | 3.97 | 0.0005 |
| Politics | 1.40 | 0.60 | 4.25 | 0.85 | 12.26 | 0.0001 |

## Figure 1

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except for Item 2 "ugly" and Item 9 "stupid." The means of the ratings of both groups on items 1 and 8 ("visit" and "instruction") all fell between 1.2 and 1.5, and there was no significant difference between the groups' ratings on either item. In other words, both groups considered the two words appropriate. For items 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10 ("propaganda," "old," "laborers," "waste," and "politics"), the means of the ratings of the Chinese group ranged from 1.4 to 2.75 and were all conspicuously lower than those of the American group which ranged from 4.2 to 4.8. The differences between the two groups' ratings were all statistically significant with $p < 0.0001$. These six items belong clearly to the culturally-loaded words, or cultural-connotation-different words.

The results on items "ugly" and "stupid" were much more complex. While the difference between the means of the language groups on both words was statistically significant, the actual mean differences were far smaller than those on the words of the previous group, i.e. the culturally-loaded words. More importantly, the means for the Chinese group were 3.95 on the word "ugly" and 3.85 on "stupid," which indicates many of them considered the words somewhat inappropriate as a 4 on the scale means somewhat inappropriate. Yet as the results of the *t*-test show, the degree of inappropriateness indicated by the Chinese students' ratings differs significantly from that suggested by those of the Americans. Thus, the cultural connotations of these two words are not, as originally assumed, entirely similar between the two languages. Instead of being labeled cultural-connotation-similar words, they should be named as quasi cultural-connotation-similar words. This finding makes good sense because Americans, by comparison, seem much more sensitive to negative words than Chinese, thanks perhaps to the political correctness movement which has substantially increased Americans' sensitivity. For example, it is a common practice in American English to avoid words that have a negative

connotation by using more positive or neutral terms. For example, the word "special" is used in "Special Olympics" and "special education" to avoid using the word "disabled." In Chinese, however, "disabled" is often the word used in both phrases. In short, the findings of this pilot study confirmed the accuracy of our intuitive understanding of most of the vocabulary items used in the study except for "ugly" and "stupid." The findings regarding the latter two words suggest that in addition to "culturally-neutral" and "cultural-connotation-different" words, there is another group: "quasi cultural-connotation-similar" words. This new understanding was taken into consideration in the data analysis of the actual study.

**The Actual Study**

Soon after the pilot study, the English version of the survey test was given to the 64 intermediate and the 61 advanced EFL college English students in China and to the 61 native-English-speaker American college students in Oklahoma by the two authors repectively. The two EFL groups were allowed to use dictionaries in completing the task for words they did not know. After the test, the subjects' ratings of the words were tabulated.

**Statistical Analysis**

To answer the first research question, "Whether EFL speakers' understanding of selected culturally-loaded words approximates that of native speakers of American English," called for a comparison of the Chinese subjects' ratings of the words with those of the Americans. Since the Chinese students were divided into two levels, and since the total number (=125) of the Chinese students was twice that (=61) of native speakers, it would not be statistically sound to conduct a *t*-test on the means between the Chinese students as one group and the native speakers as

another. Instead, an ANOVA was chosen to be conducted, followed by, if necessary, a Tukey's test to determine if there were significant differences between the ratings of the words by the three groups, i.e., the Intermediate EFL (I-EFL) group, the Advanced EFL (A-EFL) group, and the native speaker (NS) group. Furthermore, because some of the words under study were appropriate in both languages, some were inappropriate in both languages, and some were appropriate in Chinese but not in English, it would not make sense to conduct Tukey's test on the overall means of the ten words together. A Tukey's test was rendered, therefore, on each of the ten vocabulary items.

The results of the Tukey's test should also, in part, help answer the second research question: "To what extent EFL proficiency level may account for the approximation of ESL students' understanding of culturally-loaded words towards that of native speakers of American English." In addition to ascertaining whether there were significant differences between the intermediate students, the advanced students, and the native speakers, the Tukey's test would also pinpoint where the differences were. To further and more directly answer this second research question, the *r*-square generated from the ANOVA test would be checked to determine how much English proficiency might account for the variance between the three groups' ratings on the test items.

**Results and Discussion**

An ANOVA was applied and the results showed a very significant difference among the three groups' overall ratings. The results are shown in Table 2 (see Page 12). A Tukey's test was then conducted with regard to the three groups' ratings on the ten vocabulary items respectively. The results are reported in Table 3 and Figure 2 (see Page 13). Because the

**Table 2**

ANOVA Summary Table of Total Scores across Three Groups

| *Source* | *df* | *sums of squares* | *mean squares* | *F ratio* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between groups | 1 | 72.69621 | 72.69621 | 255.975 | 0.0001 |
| Within groups | 184 | 52.25540 | 0.28400 | | |
| Total | 185 | 124.95161 | | | |

*R*-square: 0.5795

## Table 3

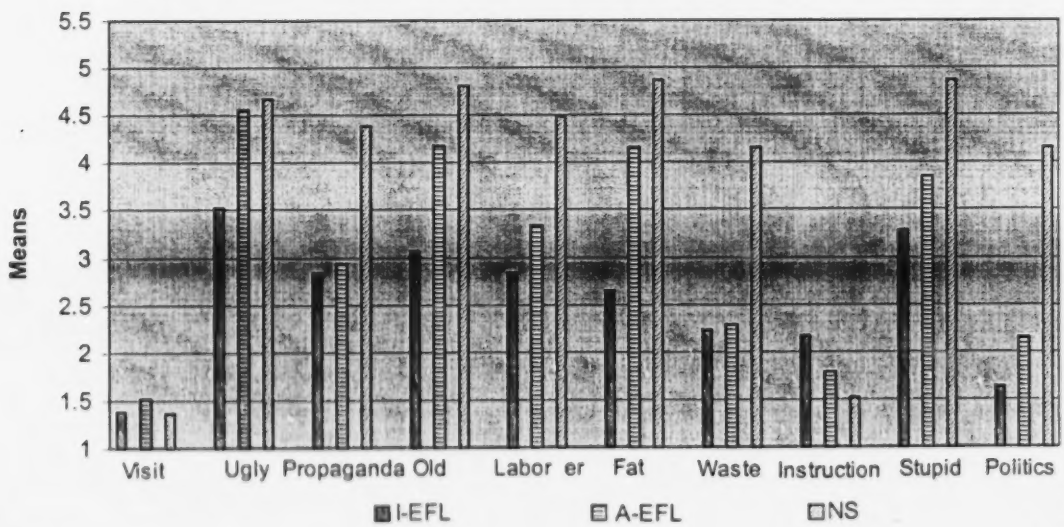
**Means, Standard Deviations, and Tukey Test Results of Comparison between the Three Groups' Ratings**

| | I-EFL (N = 64) | | A-EFL (N = 61) | | NS (N = 61) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Item* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| Visit | $1.38_a$ | 0.86 | $1.52_a$ | 0.98 | $1.36_a$ | 0.55 |
| Ugly | $3.53_b$ | 1.66 | $4.57_a$ | 1.02 | $4.67_a$ | 0.70 |
| Propaganda | $2.84_b$ | 1.35 | $2.93_b$ | 1.23 | $4.39_a$ | 0.71 |
| Old | $3.06_c$ | 1.68 | $4.18_b$ | 1.18 | $4.82_a$ | 0.39 |
| Laborer | $2.84_c$ | 1.24 | $3.34_b$ | 1.34 | $4.49_a$ | 0.65 |
| Fat | $2.64_c$ | 1.66 | $4.15_b$ | 1.29 | $4.87_a$ | 0.50 |
| Waste | $2.23_b$ | 1.17 | $2.28_b$ | 1.20 | $4.15_a$ | 0.99 |
| Instruction | $2.16_b$ | 1.16 | $1.79_{b\,a}$ | 1.19 | $1.52_a$ | 0.85 |
| Stupid | $3.28_c$ | 1.66 | $3.85_b$ | 1.39 | $4.87_a$ | 0.43 |
| Politics | $1.64_c$ | 0.78 | $2.15_b$ | 1.18 | $4.16_a$ | 0.88 |

*Note*: Means (M) with a common subscript are not significantly different by the Tukey test where $p < 0.05$.

## Figure 2

**Item Group Means**

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vocabulary items under examination consisted of three different types: culturally-neutral, quasi cultural-connotation-similar, and cultural-connotation-different words, discussion of the results will be organized around these three categories in sequence to help answer the research questions more orderly and clearly.

**Culturally-neutral words**

The results of the Tukey's test clearly separate the two culturally-neutral words ("visit" and "instruction") from the rest of the items because they are the only two words on which the group's average ratings by all three groups fall under 2.16 with most of them ranging between 1.36 and 1.79. More importantly, for the word "visit," there is no significant difference between the three groups' average ratings. As for the word "instruction," although the results are not like those on the word "visit" as expected, the differences between the groups' ratings on this word are unique in the sense that there is no significant difference between the I-EFL group and the A-EFL group, nor is there difference between the A-EFL group and the NS group. The only significant difference is between the I-EFL group and the NS group. Such findings contrast noticeably with those of the other eight items where there is, on each item, either a significant difference between all three groups or a significant difference between the two EFL groups on the one hand and the NS group on the other.

Because the three groups' average ratings on the word "visit" all lie below 1.52, and because there is no significant difference between group ratings, we can safely say that all three groups considered the word appropriate or, at least, somewhat appropriate. The word "instruction" appears to be a more complex case. As already stated, on the one hand, there is a

significant difference in the ratings between the I-EFL group and the NS group but there is no significant difference between the I-EFL group and the A-EFL group or between the A-EFL group and the NS group. More importantly, all three groups' average ratings are at 2.16 or below. Therefore, it is perhaps not incorrect to conclude, too, that all three groups considered the word appropriate or somewhat appropriate. As for why there is a significant difference between the I-EFL group and the NS group, there are two possible explanations. First, because of their lower English proficiency, some of the subjects in the I-EFL group might not have grasped the full semantic grids of the word "instruction," believing erroneously that instruction could only be used in the educational setting, not in the sports area. Second, "instruction" can be rendered or translated in the following different ways in Chinese according to contexts and usage: "jiaoshou" (meaning "teaching"), "jiaoyu" ("educating"), "zhijiao" ("advising/coaching), "zhishi" ("directive"). While the former three can be used with anyone who engages in teaching, "zhishi" can only be used to refer to instructions or directives from high ranking government officials or high ranking military officers. Some of the I-EFL subjects might have interpreted "instruction" as "zhishi" here and, consequently, chose "unsure" or "somewhat inappropriate" for rating of the word because "zhishi" was reserved for use with high ranking officials, not sports coaches.

**Quasi cultural-connotation-similar words**

The results of the Tukey test on the words "ugly" and "stupid" are also very illuminating. All three groups considered either word to be somewhat inappropriate or inappropriate, for the groups' average ratings range from 3.53 to 4.87. Yet, as was the case in the pilot study conducted to determine the accuracy of our assumptions of the cultural meanings of the words, the degree of the inappropriateness perceived by the I-EFL group and the NS group varies tremendously on

both words as their ratings differ very significantly. The ratings by the A-EFL group are intriguing. With the word "ugly," the A-EFL group's mean rating (4.57) differs significantly from that of the I-EFL group (3.53) but not from the NS group (4.67). This may suggest that the A-EFL group's understanding of the word closely approximates that of the NS group. With the word "stupid," the picture is somewhat different: the A-EFL group's mean rating (3.83) differs significantly from the I-EFL group's on the one end and from the NS group's on the other. Such findings indicate that the A-EFL group's comprehension of the word has not approximated that of the NS group but it is moving in that direction, for its rating is significantly higher than that of the I-EFL group.

**Cultural-connotation-different words**

Equally intriguing and revealing are the results on the six cultural-connotation-different words: "propaganda," "old," "laborer," "fat," "waste,", and "politics.". First, the NS group apparently considered all the six words somewhat inappropriate or inappropriate since the means of their ratings register uniformly above 4, ranging from 4.15 on the word "waste" to 4.87 on the word "fat". The I-EFL group, in contrast, deemed the items, except for the word "old," somewhat appropriate or appropriate because their mean ratings all reside below 2.84 with a 1.64 on the word "politics" at the low end and a 2.84 on the words "propaganda" and "laborer" at the high end. The group's mean rating of 3.06 on the word "old" suggests that on the one hand, the students were unsure of its appropriateness and on the other hand, unlike the NS group, they did not consider the word inappropriate either. More importantly, the Tukey's test shows the I-EFL group's mean ratings on all six words to be significantly different from those of the NS group. The case with the A-EFL group is, again, more complex. The group's average ratings are

consistently higher than those of the I-EFL group and uniformly lower than those of the NS group. Yet while the group's mean ratings differ significantly from those of the NS group on all six items, they differ significantly from those of the I-EFL group only on four of them ("old," "laborer," "fat," and "politics"), not on "propaganda" and "waste."

Also worth notice is the fact that on four ("propaganda," "laborer," "waste," and "politics") of the six words, the A-EFL group's ratings stay closer to that of the I-EFL group with its mean being only 0.09 from the I-EFL group's but 1.46 from the NS group's on the word "propaganda," 0.5 versus 1.15 on "laborer, 0.05 versus 1.87 on "waste," and 0.51 versus 2.01 on "politics." Only on the remaining two words, the A-EFL group's ratings lean closer to those of the NS group with their mean being 1.12 from the I-EFL group's but only 0.64 from the NS group's on the word "old," and 1.51 versus 0.72 on "fat." The results indicate that while the A-EFL group, whose mean ratings are consistently higher than those of the I-EFL group, exhibited a tendency of approximation toward that of the NS group in understanding culturally-loaded words, the approximation is inadequate because all their ratings are significantly different from those of the NS group. In addition, the extent of the inadequate approximation varies rather noticeably from word to word. For example, the A-EFL group's understanding seems to approximate much more closely to the NS group's on the words "old" and "fat" than on the other four words, for the former group's ratings are above 4.15 on these two words but mostly under 3 on the others. The rather high ratings on the two words by the A-EFL group would suggest that the students in this group, like those in the NS group, considered the words somewhat inappropriate or inappropriate. Yet the results of the Tukey's test still show a significant difference between the A-EFL group's and the NS group's ratings on the two words; therefore, the degrees of inappropriateness rated by the two groups differ significantly.

Why does the A-EFL group's understanding of "old" and "fat" approximate more closely to the NS group's than their understanding of the other four cultural-connotation-different words? An explanation is that the two are very frequently used words, so EFL students are likely to encounter them more often in their English learning material than the other culturally-loaded words in this study. By the same token, most Chinese instructors of English, according to an informal interview survey we conducted, not only understand the negative connotations of the words in English but also have plenty of opportunity to alert the students to their negative cultural meanings. The other culturally-loaded words ("propaganda," "laborer," and "politics") are much less commonly used, and even most Chinese instructors of English, based on our survey, are not aware of the words' negative connotations in English. In fact, English newspapers and magazines published in China for international readers such as *China Daily* and *Beijing Review* often use such words, either unaware of or indifferent to their negative connotations. This suggests that low-frequency culturally-loaded words are much more difficult to detect and therefore warrant our special attention.

**English proficiency and acquisition of culturally-loaded words**

The fact that the A-EFL students' average ratings are consistently higher than those of the I-EFL group and closer to those of the NS group on the culturally-loaded words would suggests that English proficiency has an effect on EFL students' understanding of these words. The r-square (Table 3) from the ANOVA test seems to suggest the same, for the *r*-square value 0.5795 indicates that English proficiency accounted for close to 58% of the variance of the subjects' ratings. Yet the influence of English proficiency does not appear sufficient because the A-EFL group's ratings are still significantly lower than those of the NS group's.

**Conclusion and Implications**

The study shows some, but inadequate, L2 learners' approximation towards NSs in comprehending culturally-loaded words because even most of the advanced EFL students in the study still did not seem to recognize the cultural connotations of many of the culturally-loaded words. Such findings suggest that increased L2 proficiency does not automatically nor adequately improve L2 students' appreciation of culturally-loaded words. More attention should thus be paid to this group of words in EFL/ESL instruction and research. To accomplish that, the following seems necessary.

1. EFL/ESL educators, native and non-native speakers alike, should become more sensitive to culturally-loaded words. Based on our observations, many non-native-speaker EFL instructors are not aware of the cultural connotations of some of the English words. Similarly, we would not expect many native speakers to know these words' cultural connotations in the students' native language.

2. As with grammar instruction, vocabulary in general should be taught in context. Items taught in isolation must be accompanied by exercises with sufficient social and cultural contexts. Vocabulary learning must emerge from lessons that aim to help students develop communicative competence. EFL/ESL instructors should highlight all the culturally-loaded words by explaining not only their different cultural connotations but also the consequences of misusing them. EFL/ESL material writers should make an effort to include in their texts culturally-loaded words as points of discussion and learning.

3. More studies need to be conducted to identify culturally-loaded words, especially those whose unique cultural connotations are difficult to detect by intuition and those that easily escape our attention due to their low frequency of occurrence.

4. Because of the findings concerning the words "ugly" and "stupid," it appears necessary to empirically examine those words that are intuitively considered cultural-connotation similar. Even though the connotational meanings of these words in the two languages may be similar, their difference in the degree of appropriateness or inappropriateness can still cause miscommunication because, as indicated in this study, L2 students are more likely than native speakers to use a word that is less inappropriate in their L1 than in L2. Research should thus be conducted to determine the potential difficulties of these quasi cultural-connotation-similar words to L2 students .

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Appendix 1

Read the following sentences and indicate your opinion of the social and/or semantic appropriateness of the underlined words by circling one of the numbers (1 = "Appropriate and you would use the word," 2 = Somewhat appropriate and you probably would use the word," 3 = "Not sure," 4 = "Somewhat inappropriate and you probably would not use the word," 5 = "Inappropriate and you would not use the word."

1. We visited an auto plant yesterday.

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

2. A and B are classmates. After A shows B a picture of his or her sister, B says, "Oh, your sister looks ugly."

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

3. Many people still haven't heard of our new product. We need to engage in more propaganda about the product to let everyone know it.

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

4. A school invites a group of retired officials to its performance show. The principal introduces these officials to the audience by saying, "Today we are honored to have these old officials join us at our assembly."

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

5. Our schools' job is to produce moral, educated and disciplined laborers for the country.

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

6. A and B are classmates. After A mentions to B that his Aunt is not tall but weighs two hundred pounds, B responds, "It seems that your Aunt is a rather fat woman."

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

7. After a student finishes visiting his professor concerning a course assignment, the student says to the professor, "I'm sorry to have wasted so much of your time."

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

8. The coach gave his team some important instructions before the game.

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

9. A teacher is talking to Mr. Smith about his son's problems at school. The teacher says, "Mr. Smith, I've explained the math problems to your son many times, but he still does not understand them at all. It seems that he is

a little stupid."

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

10. To fight against social disorder and corruption, all officials must focus on politics putting it above everything else including economical issues.

Appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 Inappropriate

Appendix 2

Chinese Translation of the Survey Test

1. women zuotian canguan le yijua qiche zhizaochang.

2. jia he yi shi tongxue. zai jia gei yi kan guo qi mei de zhaopian hou, yi dui jia shuo, "ai, ni meimei zhang-de man chou."

3. Xuduo ren hai mei tingshuo-guo women de xin changpin. women xuyao zuo gengduo de xuanchuan yibian rang renren dou zhidao zhe ge changpin.

4. yisuo xuxiao qing le yipi tuixiu ganbu lai kan xuesheng wenyibianyian. Xiaozhang zai jieshao zhexie ganbu shi shuo, "jintian, women rongxing di you zhexie lao ganbu canjia women de wenyi bianyian wei."

5. Xuexiao de renwu shi wei guojia peiyang you daode, you jiaoyu, he shou jiliu de laodong zhe."

6. jia he yi sh tongxue. zai jia gaosu yi tai gugu bu gao dan zhong lianbai duo bang hou, yi shuo, "kanlao ni gugu shi ge man pang de nuren."

7. zai yiwe xuesheng xian laoshi ginjiao yi xiang zuoye de wenti hou, ta dui laoshi shuo, "duibuqi, langfei nin zheme duo shijian."

8. zheweo jiaolian za qiusai qian gei duiyuanmen zuole yifan zhijiao.

9. yiwei laoshi zai gen Smith xiansheng tan ta erzi xuexi-shang de wenti. zhewei laoshi shuo, "Smith xiansheng, wo yijing ba zhege shuxue wenti gen ni erzi jaing-le xuduo bian, danshi ta haishi yidian dou bu dong. kanlai ta shi youdain ban."

10. wele fangzhi sehui dongluan he fubai, suoyou ganbu dou bixu giangdiao zhengzhi bing ba zhengzhi fanzai qita suoyou wenti zi shang, baokuo jingji wenti zai ne.